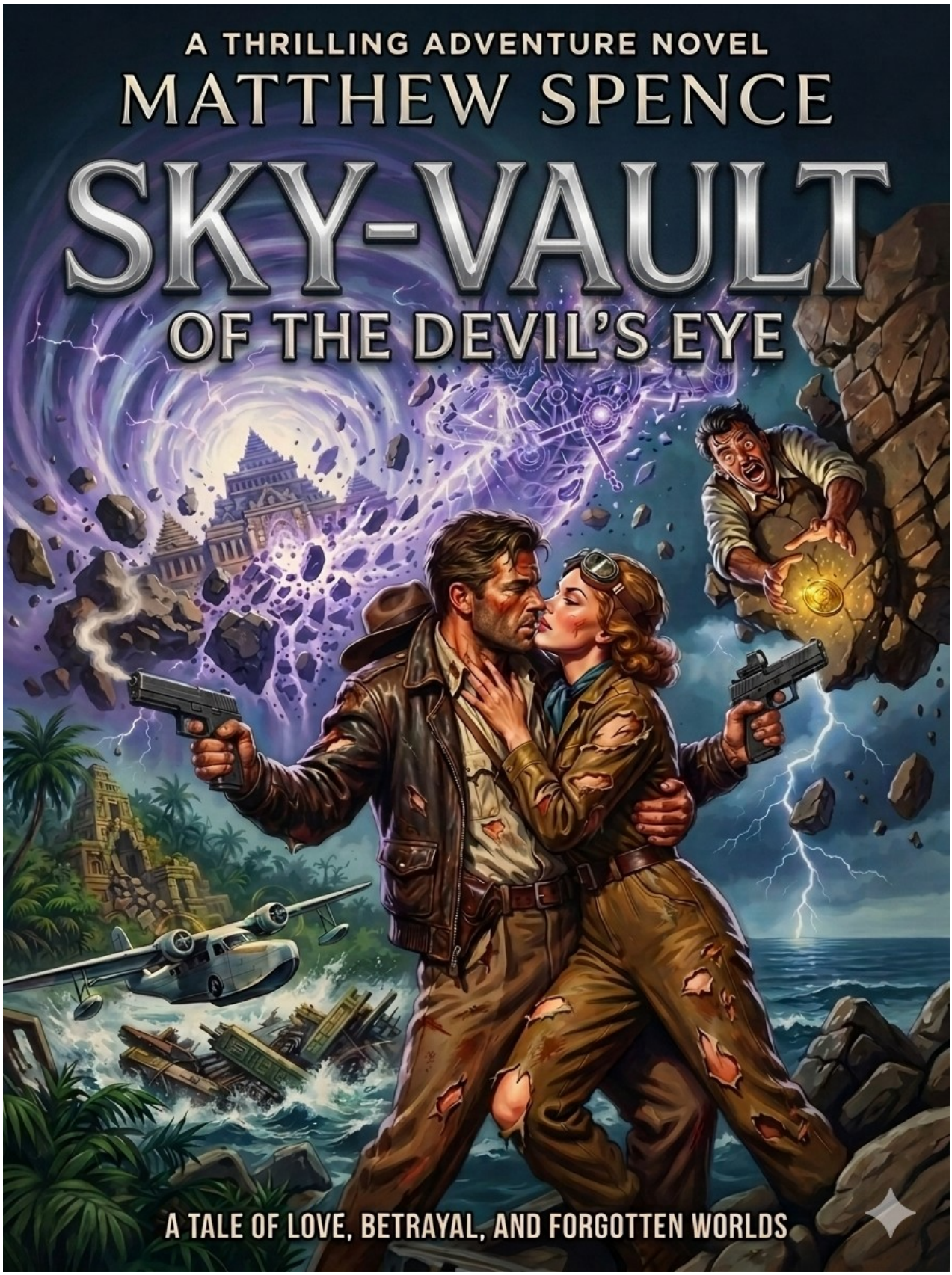
A THRILLING ADVENTURE NOVEL
MATTHEW SPENCE
SKY-VAULT
OF THE DEVIL'S EYE
A TALE OF LOVE, BETRAYAL, AND FORGOTTEN WORLDS

SKY-VAULT OF THE DEVIL'S EYE

By

Matthew Spence

The ceiling fan in the Manila dive sliced through the humid air like a slow machete, but it did nothing to cool the sweat bead rolling down Johnny Sterling's collar. He stared at the ancient, grease-stained parchment pinned beneath his calloused thumb. To anyone else, the jagged ink lines looked like a child's doodle of the Philippine Sea. To Johnny, it was a roadmap to the *Empress of Asia*, a treasure galleon swallowed by the Pacific in 1941.

A shadow fell over his table, blocking the neon glow of the streetlamps outside.

"You're a hard man to find, Captain Sterling," a voice purred.

Johnny didn't look up. He recognized the high-dollar leather of the boots entering his peripheral vision before he even heard the refined British accent. He took a slow sip of his lukewarm San Miguel beer.

"The world is getting smaller, Mr. Sinclair. But I can still find corners to hide in if the company isn't right."

Alistair Sinclair slid into the opposite bamboo chair without asking. He looked entirely out of place in the smoke-filled tavern, immaculate in a crisp linen suit despite the tropical downpour raging outside. He placed a heavy, velvet-lined box on the scarred wood between them.

"I don't want you to hide," Sinclair said, snapping the box open. "I want you to fly."

Inside the box sat a heavy gold medallion. It wasn't Spanish bullion. It was etched with a terrifying, stylized bird with jagged lightning bolts radiating from its eyes—the exact same symbol Johnny had spent the last three years tracking through fever-dream rumors and blood-stained logbooks. The Thunderer.

"We found the sister piece in a temple collapse outside Mandalay," Sinclair whispered, his eyes gleaming with the manic obsession Johnny knew all too well. "The local legends call it the key to the sky-vault. But we need a pilot crazy enough to fly an unpressurized vintage bird through the Devil’s Eye typhoon to reach the coordinates."

Johnny finally looked up, a slow, dangerous grin spreading across his sun-bronzed face. His old twin-engine Grumman Goose amphibian was sitting at the docks, patched together with baling wire, duct tape, and prayers. She wasn't pretty, but she could punch through a hurricane if the man at the yoke had enough nerve.

"A storm like that will rip the wings right off a modern jet," Johnny said, his pulse beginning to hammer a familiar, thrilling rhythm against his ribs. "Lucky for you, my girl doesn't know how to quit."

Before Sinclair could answer, the frosted glass of the bar's front door shattered into a thousand glittering shards.

Three men stepped through the rain-soaked threshold. They didn't wear the local linen or tropical shirts. They wore heavy, dark trench coats despite the sweltering heat, and their hands were buried deep inside their pockets. The leader, a man with a jagged scar bisecting his left eyebrow, scanned the room until his eyes locked onto the gold medallion gleaming on Johnny’s table.

"Sinclair," Johnny muttered, his hand dropping smoothly beneath the table to the familiar checkered grip of his Colt .45. "Did you bring company?"

"I was under the impression we shook them in Singapore," Sinclair gasped, his face draining of color as he reached for the box.

"Too late," Johnny barked.

With a hard shove, Johnny flipped the heavy bamboo table forward. It caught the first two thugs square in the chest just as the unmistakable *rat-tat-tat* of a concealed submachine gun chewed into the bar mirror behind them, showering the room in silvered glass and cheap whiskey.

Johnny grabbed Sinclair by the collar of his expensive suit and hauled him toward the back exit.

"Welcome to the adventure, Sinclair! Try not to ruin the suit!"

CHAPTER TWO

The rain in the alley slammed down like a sheet of corrugated iron, but it was nothing compared to the heat of the tommy gun muzzle flashes lighting up the brick walls.

"Down!" Johnny Sterling roared, throwing his shoulder into Sinclair’s ribs.

The two men hit the muddy puddles just as a hail of lead chewed a line of jagged craters into the bricks above their heads. Standing at the mouth of the alleyway was a towering brute in a sodden trench coat, his scarred face twisted into a snarl as he reloaded a drum magazine with practiced ease. Johnny scrambled behind a stack of rusted oil drums, his Colt .45 barking twice in response. The heavy slugs caught the gunman’s shoulder, spinning him around and sending his weapon clattering into the gutter.

"Move! Before his friends wake up!" Johnny yelled, hauling a trembling Sinclair to his feet and sprinting through the dark, winding maze of the Manila docks toward the hangar lights.

The hangar smelled of high-octane fuel, wet canvas, and a perfume Johnny would recognize if he were blind, deaf, and halfway to the grave. Jasmin.

Standing on the wing of the twin-engine Grumman Goose was Roxy Vance. She wore oil-stained khaki trousers, a leather flight jacket thrown over a white tank top, and a wrench held in her grease-smeared hand like a scepter. Her dark curls were pinned back, exposing the razor-sharp jawline and flashing green eyes that had haunted Johnny from Shanghai to San Francisco.

"You're late, Sterling," Roxy called down, her voice a sultry mix of gravel and honey that made Johnny's ribs ache worse than the dive-bar floor. "And you brought laundry."

"Roxy," Johnny breathed, stopping dead in his tracks despite the chaos behind them.

Two years ago, they were the toast of the South Seas circuit. Then came the job in Macau. Johnny had walked away to protect her from a triad death mark, leaving her with a broken heart and a half-empty bottle of bourbon in a smoke-filled hotel room. She had never forgiven him for making the choice for her.

"Don't 'Roxy' me, you low-down sky-tramp," she snapped, hopping down from the wing with a fluid, athletic grace that made his pulse spike. She pointed the wrench directly at his chest. "You swore if you ever showed your face on my tarmac again, it would be with my half of the charter money from the Sumatra run."

"I've got something better," Johnny said, flashing his signature, dangerous grin as Sinclair stumbled into the hangar, clutching the velvet box. "We've got the key to the sky-vault. And a pack of trench-coated gorillas right on our tail."

Roxy looked from Johnny to the pale, sweating British aristocrat, and then to the heavy gold medallion Sinclair was now frantically pulling from the box. The stylized thunderbird caught the harsh overhead bulbs, gleaming with an eerie, almost liquid light.

Her breath hitched. She knew the legend. More importantly, she knew the coordinates.

"You idiot," she whispered, a fierce, brilliant spark igniting in her green eyes. But before she could cuss him out properly, the heavy wooden hangar doors groaned and splintered outward.

The scarred leader from the bar stepped into the light, a fresh submachine gun leveled right at Roxy's torso. "Hand over the medallion, Captain, or the lady gets ventilated."

Johnny didn't hesitate. He stepped squarely in front of Roxy, his Colt raised, shield-ing her body with his own. "Over my dead body, pal."

Behind his back, Roxy’s hand slipped into Johnny's back pocket, her fingers brushing against his hip as she smoothly filched his spare ammunition clip. "Get ready to dive, Johnny," she whispered against his ear, her warm breath sending a jolt straight down his spine. "Because I'm about to blow the lights."

CHAPTER THREE

Roxy didn't wait for permission. She smashed the heavy steel wrench into the valve of a pressurized acetylene tank resting against the hangar wall.

A blinding hiss of white gas erupted into the air, instantly mixing with the fumes of Johnny’s spare fuel drums. Roxy snatched a flare gun from the Grumman’s pontoon and fired it directly into the cloud. A roaring wall of orange fire detonated between them and the thugs, casting long, frantic shadows across the corrugated steel walls.

"Get us up, Johnny! Now!" Roxy screamed, shoved him toward the cockpit.

Johnny scrambled into the pilot’s seat, slamming his hands onto the throttles. The twin Pratt & Whitney engines coughed, sputtered, and then roared to life with a deafening, metallic scream. Through the smoke, the scarred leader fired blindly, his bullets tearing through the hangar’s glass windows, but the Grumman Goose was already rolling. Johnny steered the flying boat out of the burning structure and onto the rain-slicked waters of Manila Bay, tearing into the pitch-black sky just as the hangar exploded into a spectacular fireball behind them.

Hours later, the storm outside was a low, rumbling threat, but the real turbulence was inside the cramped cockpit.

The glowing dials of the instrument panel cast a faint, emerald light over Roxy’s sharp profile. Sinclair was passed out cold from exhaustion in the rear passenger seats, leaving Johnny and Roxy trapped

together in a space no bigger than a coat closet. Every time the plane caught an air pocket, their shoulders brushed, sending a jolt through Johnny that had nothing to do with the weather.

"You always did know how to clear a room, Rox," Johnny said softly, keeping his eyes locked on the dark horizon.

"Save it, Johnny," Roxy snapped, though her hand trembled slightly as she adjusted the fuel mixture. "You don't get to run out on me in Macau, leave me to clean up a triad mess, and then slide back into my life like you're some kind of hero."

Johnny sighed, his fingers tightening on the yoke. "I left because Chen’s assassins were looking for *me*, not you. If I stayed, you'd be at the bottom of the Pearl River."

"I can fight my own battles, Johnny Sterling!" Roxy whipped her head around, her green eyes flashing in the dark. "I didn't need a savior. I needed my partner. I needed *you*."

The raw hurt in her voice cut deeper than any bullet. Johnny reached out, his calloused hand gently covering hers on the throttle quadrant. For a second, the anger in her eyes softened into something ancient and deeply tender.

Suddenly, the radar screen between them began to whine, its sweeping green line crackling with heavy static.

A massive, pulsing shape bloomed on the glass indicator—but it wasn't a standard storm cloud. It was a perfectly circular, glowing anomaly hovering right at the swirling center of the Devil’s Eye typhoon, completely defying the natural laws of meteorology.

CHAPTER FOUR

The green anomaly on the radar flared with a brilliant, blinding pulse, and the cockpit instantly went haywire.

The altimeter spun like a roulette wheel, the compass needles whirled in dizzying circles, and the glowing dials began to leak a strange, static hum that vibrated through the rivets of the plane. The controls went completely dead. The yoke stiffened into solid iron under Johnny’s hands, locking the Grumman Goose into a steep, unpowered dive straight toward the churning heart of the ocean.

"The engines are dead! I’ve lost the rudders!" Johnny roared, throwing his full weight against the steering column.

Roxy didn't panic. She threw herself across the narrow center console, her shoulder slamming hard against Johnny's chest as her hands flew to the emergency manual overrides. "Help me pull, Johnny!" she screamed over the howling wind. Together, their hands locked over the cold steel levers, their faces inches apart as the raw adrenaline of survival fused with the lingering heat of their past. With a synchronized, desperate heave, they yanked the nose up just as the plane smashed through the tree canopy of an unmapped island hidden inside the storm.

The Grumman screamed as its aluminum hull tore through dense jungle foliage, finally grinding to a bone-shattering halt in a steaming, muddy swamp.

Silence fell over the wreckage, broken only by the hiss of cooling metal and the frantic gasps of the survivors.

"Everyone intact?" Johnny groaned, wiping a smear of blood and engine grease from his forehead. Sinclair whimpered a terrified affirmative from the back, while Roxy was already kicking open the jammed side hatch, her Colt .45 drawn and ready.

Johnny scrambled out after her, stepping down into the knee-deep black mud of the primeval swamp. The air smelled of sulfur, ancient moss, and something entirely unnatural. As the tropical mist parted under the eerie, violet light of the sky-vault radiating from above, Johnny and Roxy froze.

They hadn't just crashed on a deserted island.

Rising directly out of the swamp, towering hundreds of feet above the jungle canopy, was a colossal, hyper-modern runway made of an unearthly, shimmering black alloy. It looked completely untouched by time. Parked in neat, silent rows along the tarmac were dozens of pristine, gleaming aircraft—ranging from 1920s biplanes to experimental, wingless chrome vessels that looked like they had been built in the next century.

"Johnny..." Roxy whispered, her voice stripped of all its usual bravado as she looked at the graveyard of missing aviators. "Look at the tail numbers."

Before Johnny could read the faded insignias, a heavy, mechanical hum reverberated beneath their feet, and the black runway began to glow with a brilliant amber light.

CHAPTER FIVE

The amber light tracking along the black alloy runway suddenly coalesced into a single, blinding pillar of energy. From the center of the beam stepped a figure that made Johnny’s hand freeze on his holster. It was a woman, but her skin possessed a faint, metallic sheen, and her eyes burned with the same violet radiation as the sky-vault above. She wore a sleek, high-collared flight suit that looked both ancient and impossibly futuristic.

"Welcome, travelers of the lower air," she said, her voice echoing directly inside their minds like a striking silver bell. "I am the Keeper of the Sky-Vault. You have entered the hangar of the forgotten."

Before Johnny or Roxy could utter a word, the air around them grew heavy as lead. A crushing gravitational field slammed down, pinning Johnny and Roxy flat against the shimmering black tarmac. They were paralyzed, completely unable to lift so much as a finger as the Keeper began a slow, rhythmic march toward them.

Trapped side-by-side in the invisible vice, staring death in the face, the walls between them finally shattered.

"Roxy," Johnny choked out, his voice strained under the immense pressure. "If this is it... I need you to know. Leaving Macau wasn't about the money or the triads. I was terrified of losing you. I've loved you since the day you out-flew me in Singapore, and I've never stopped."

Roxy turned her head with agonizing slowness, her green eyes shimmering with tears that finally spilled across her cheeks. "You stubborn idiot," she whispered, her voice fierce despite the weight crushing her chest. "I didn't care about the danger, Johnny. I only cared about you. I love you too. Don't you dare die on me now."

A sharp, mocking laugh cut through the humming gravity field.

To Johnny's horror, Alistair Sinclair stood up perfectly straight, completely unaffected by the paralyzing force. He brushed a speck of jungle mud from his pristine linen suit, a sinister, triumphant sneer replacing his previously cowardly expression. He stepped over Johnny and Roxy, casually holding out the gold medallion to the Keeper.

"Excellently acted, my friends," Sinclair purred, his British accent dripping with venom. "But I'm afraid this is where our charter ends. The legends forgot to mention that the Sky-Vault requires a sacrifice of pure avian blood to unlock its armada. I didn't hire you for your flying skills, Sterling. I hired you and your fiery lady because your bloodlines trace back to the original keepers of the sky."

Sinclair knelt down, patting Johnny's cheek with a sickening grin. "Once she drains your life force to power these vessels, I will command an armada that can crush any military on earth."

CHAPTER SIX

Sinclair's sneer was still pasted on his face when Roxy smiled. It was a small, wicked curling of her lips that Johnny knew meant someone was about to get hurt.

"You talk too much, Sinclair," Roxy hissed.

With a sudden, violent twist of her wrist, she triggered the emergency release of a miniature, high-frequency arc-welder she had kept concealed in the thick leather cuff of her flight jacket—a tool she used for stubborn fuel lines. The device emitted a high-pitched, localized electromagnetic pulse. The blue spark didn't just short out the invisible gravity field around her; it struck the shimmering black alloy runway beneath them.

The entire gravitational grid shattered with a sound like tearing canvas.

Johnny scrambled up instantly, his Colt .45 leaping into his hand. He fired three rapid shots, smashing the velvet box right out of Sinclair’s grip. The gold medallion went flying through the air, tumbling end-over-end toward the edge of the runway.

"The medallion!" Sinclair shrieked, scrambling like a rat across the smooth metal.

But the Keeper was already moving, her violet eyes flaring with wrath as the sky-vault began to reject Sinclair's stolen key. The amber lights turned a violent, pulsing crimson. The ancient hangar groaned, and the ground began to open up, swallowing the rows of pristine, silent aircraft into the swampy abyss below.

"Johnny, the energy grid!" Roxy yelled, ducking as a bolt of raw lightning arched over her head from the Keeper's hands. "It's feeding on fear! It wants a sacrifice, but it reacts to what we feel!"

Johnny leaped across the fracturing tarmac, tackling Roxy behind the fuselage of an old, abandoned biplane just as another energy blast vaporized the runway where they had been standing. He pulled her close, their hearts hammering in a wild, synchronized rhythm against each other's chests.

"You heard the lady!" Johnny shouted over the deafening roar of the crumbling island. "I'm not afraid of this place, Rox! Not as long as I'm with you!"

He leaned in and kissed her—a fierce, breathless, cinematic kiss that tasted of rain, ozone, and absolute certainty. The decades of heartbreak, the regrets of Macau, and the fear of tomorrow vanished in a single, burning second.

The moment their lips met, a brilliant, blinding shockwave of pure white light erupted outward from the lovers. The Sky-Vault's crimson alarms suddenly turned a calm, radiant gold. The raw, emotional frequency of their reconciled love completely overloaded the Keeper's ancient psychic tech. The metallic woman let out a silent, crystalline scream as the violet energy in her eyes shattered, dissolving her back into a harmless cloud of glowing mist.

"Look!" Roxy gasped, pulling away as the ground gave another massive heave.

Sinclair had finally reached the gold medallion, but he was too late. The central pillar of energy collapsed inward like a dying star, creating a localized black hole that began to drag the shimmering runway into the earth. With a final, terrified scream, Sinclair was sucked down into the depths of the sky-vault, his grand armada vanishing with him into the dark annals of forgotten history.

"Johnny! The Goose!" Roxy pointed toward the swamp.

Their old Grumman Goose was still floating in the mire, its twin engines miraculously sputtering back to life as the island's anomalous electromagnetic field dissipated. But the jungle walls were caving in, and a massive tidal wave was rushing toward the swamp from the collapsing outer reef.

They had two choices: scramble into the cockpit of an experimental, wingless chrome vessel that might shoot them into outer space, or trust the patched-together, baling-wire flying boat that had carried them through hell.

"Old school or new school, Rox?" Johnny yelled, grabbing her hand as they sprinted toward the water.

"Are you kidding?" Roxy laughed, her green eyes flashing with pure adrenaline. "The Goose has a liquor cabinet! Let's get out of here!"

They vaulted into the cockpit together. Johnny jammed his hand onto the throttles while Roxy managed the fuel mixtures, their movements perfectly synchronized, a flawless partnership forged in fire. The Grumman Goose roared down the churning swamp water, lifting off into the stormy sky just as the mysterious island vanished beneath the Pacific waves forever.

As the morning sun finally broke through the dissipating clouds of the Devil's Eye typhoon, painting the sky in shades of gold and pink, Johnny leaned back in his seat and looked at the spectacular woman beside him.

"So, partner," Johnny smiled, reaching across the console to lock his fingers through hers. "Where to next?"

Roxy smiled back, leaning over to kiss his cheek. "Anywhere you want, Johnny. Just don't let me catch you hiding in any more corners."